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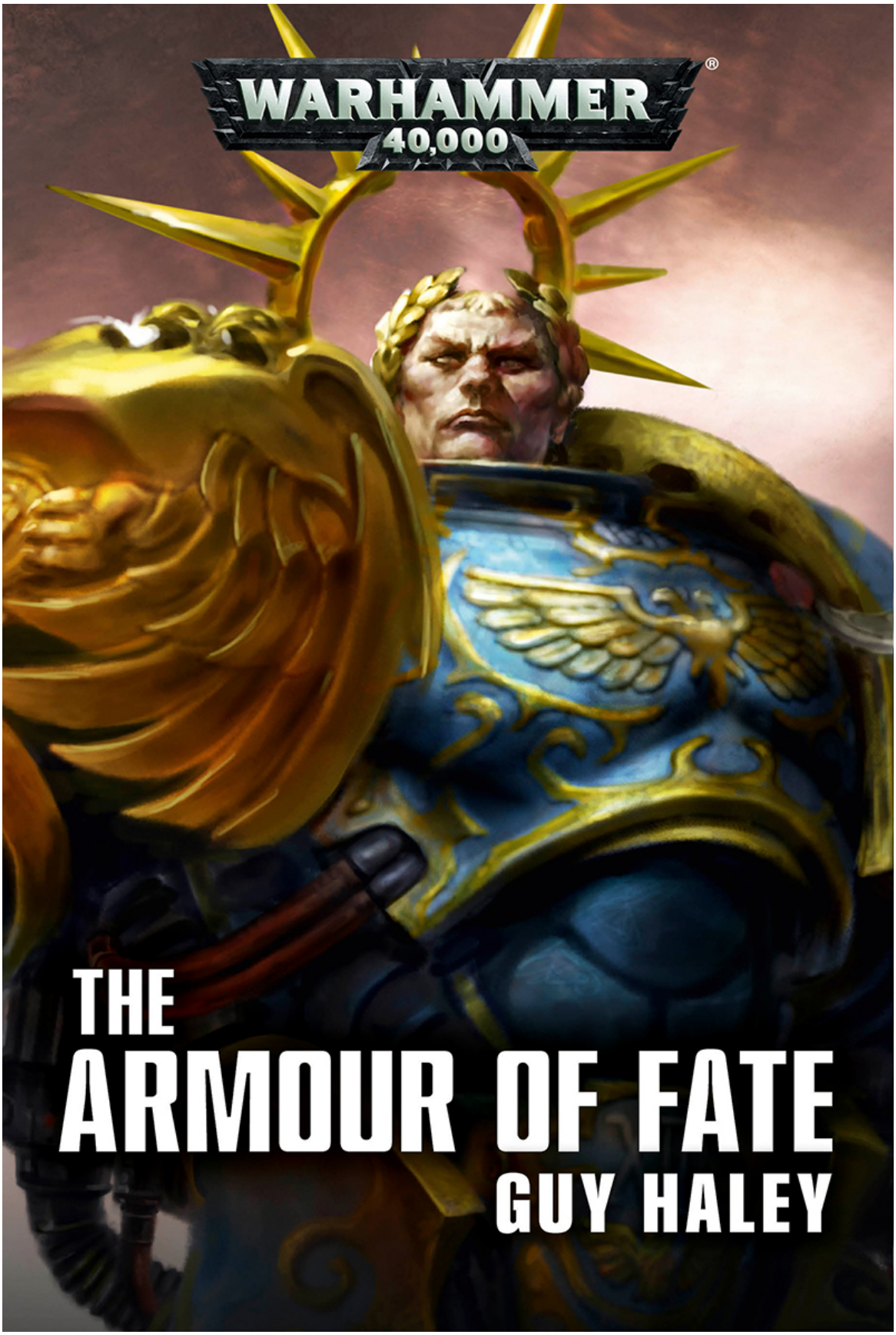
ARMOUR OF FATE
GUY HALEY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THE ARMOUR OF FATE

Guy Haley

The Armour of Fate hummed its secret tunes at all times, but they were most noticeable when all else was quiet, and nowhere was quieter on *Macragge's Honour* than Roboute Guilliman's scriptorium.

No such thing as a silent suit of power armour existed. Even the specially adapted battleplate of Primaris Reivers emitted a toothache whine. Power armour carried a compact reactor, which made a noise. Fibre bundles contracting in their sleeves of plasteel made a noise. Servo motors at the major joints that worked in concert with the bundles and with the wearer's limbs… They made a noise. As did the cogitator unit, the pharmacopoeia, the recycling plant, the nutrient dispenser, atmospheric filtration system, vox-comms system, and all the other various, miniaturised artefacts that were crammed into its armoured shell. In the library silence it was aggravatingly loud, boring through Roboute Guilliman's concentration as steadily as a worm spoiling an apple.

The primarch did not need to sleep. That was fortunate, because he thought it likely he would not manage with the sound of the armour's workings buzzing through his skull. If he could lie down in it in the first place. It was bonded to him, impossible to remove, a situation he worked to remedy.

'This armour is the work of genius, but it is damnably noisy,' said Roboute Guilliman testily.

'My lord?' Captain Sicarius waited on him that evening, though he did not have to; Guilliman was more than capable of defending himself, and besides, Captain Sicarius could easily exempt himself from such duties.

Nevertheless, he stood on guard by the entrance on the far side of the chamber, lost in his thoughts. Guilliman pitied the warrior. He had known Sicarius only a little before he vanished into the warp, but it was enough to notice that he had changed for the worse when he returned.

‘Nothing,’ said Guilliman. He tried to think. Upon a separate table set up in a recess, and crowding the shelves around it, was every work upon Adeptus Astartes power armour in existence, in multifarious formats. That subsection of his library alone was a trove of information any magos of Mars would kill to access, not that Guilliman would ever let such fanatics past the doorway.

Sheaves of blueprints were scattered across the desk in front of him. He spotted something of interest written on one and reached for it, gritting his teeth against the purring of the suit. He always reached with his right hand. The integration points for the Hand of Dominion on his left made picking anything up nigh on impossible, even with the over gauntlet and its underslung bolter removed. Day-to-day tasks such as this were a struggle. His armoured fingers pushed at slick plastek. Ceramite skidded across the papers, knocking them to the ground in wafting flutters.

‘Oh, for the love of…’ he grumbled as he bent awkwardly to pick them up. The Armour of Fate was bulky. As its waist joint prevented him from flexing his spine and reaching the floor, he had to kneel. He reached for the scattered flimsies. Fingertips failed to grasp the sheets, sending them fleeing in small armadas over the polished floor. He growled in frustration, abandoned his task and stood, drawing a curious look from Sicarius.

‘I have the manual dexterity of a Legio Cybernetica battle automaton!’ Guilliman said. ‘Created by the Lord of All Mankind, master of the greatest armies in the Imperium, and I cannot pick up a plastek flimsy.’ He glared at the offending articles. ‘My greatest enemy.’

There was a thoughtful quiet.

‘You are joking, my lord?’ said Sicarius.

Guilliman looked at Sicarius. He had to turn all the way around to do so. The pauldrons, ornamental wings and large halo mounted on his back made it impossible for him to see over his shoulder. At least he had stopped knocking into things. There was that.

‘By the Throne, why am I expected to be serious at all times? Yes, Captain Sicarius, I am making light of my predicament. During the worst of the

Great Crusade, I was known to make the occasional jest. Even after Terra fell. I did not spend my entire previous life writing deep thoughts into little notebooks, but sometimes dared to enjoy myself. I suppose that was not recorded in the hagiographies.'

'Humour is not something you are renowned for, my lord.'

'My time in this new age has revealed that to me amply.' Guilliman held up his right hand and clenched it. One could not form a fist properly in power armour. Fingers could be clenched to punch effectively, but they would not curl inward fully. Plates and soft seals got in the way, holding the digits slightly away from the palm. If he squeezed hard to make them nestle, the ceramite squealed against itself, and he feared that he would break it. His right hand did nearly close, but for his left hand, which was wreathed with power plugs and interface ports, there was no chance. The inability to clench his fists properly frustrated him more than any other thing. Even more than the itches he could not scratch, and the impossibility of bathing.

'There must be another way,' he said, spreading his fingers again.

'You wish me to fetch your scribes to collect your papers, my lord?'

'I do not wish for you to fetch my scribes,' he snapped. 'I do not wish to watch them pick up things for me. I do not wish to be so helpless!' He raised the hand that wore the outer power fist assembly. 'In this armour I can crush the skull of an ork warlord, but I cannot lift a cup of recaff, nor hold a pen.' He shook his head ruefully. 'This armour has to come off.'

'But…' said Sicarius, his doleful manner broken for the briefest second by a hint of surprise. 'You told me you would die if you tried.'

'That was what I was told by the aeldari prophetess. That does not necessarily mean it is true. What do you think I have been doing in here these last weeks?' He gestured at the piles of flimsies.

Sicarius shrugged. His armour too whined, causing Guilliman to grimace. 'Studying, my lord. I do not question what.' He paused again. 'You spend a lot of time studying.'

'This study has a singular purpose. This is the Armour of Fate, but while I wear it I am not in command of my own. It must be removed. I have learned how.'

'Yes, my lord.'

'I have, however, reached something of an impasse,' Guilliman said. 'All

the secrets of the armour's function are here.' He rapped the table. That action, at least, was accomplished easily enough. 'There is but one question that I do not know the answer to.' He stared at intricate plans he had memorised already, his eyes darting over their lines as if he would spot something he had missed. 'You may leave me, captain,' he said. 'I do not need you hovering over my shoulder constantly. When you go, take the others with you. No guard is required on my scriptorium this watch. I prefer to be alone.'

'My lord.' Sicarius dipped his head in acknowledgement.

'And I apologise for my tone,' said Guilliman, still testy. 'I find this situation frustrating.'

'Yes, my lord.' Sicarius withdrew, leaving Guilliman alone with the burden of the Armour of Fate and its infuriating noises.

The last loyal son of the Emperor waited until he was sure the Victrix Guard had departed, using the time to put his things in as good an order as he could with his clumsy armoured hands, then set out for his quarters and the concealed lifter there.

Astropath Prime Ultra Guidus Losenti was surprised to find Guilliman entering the hidden chambers of the Cawl Inferior.

'Do you have a message for the Archmagos?' asked Losenti.

'No,' said Guilliman bluntly.

Losenti paused uncertainly. The blind stones nested in his eye sockets glinted in the ruddy light of the machine.

'Do we have a new code then, my lord?' he said, perturbed. 'Has the Archmagos been in contact? I have sensed nothing. Did I miss something?'

The look of alarm on Losenti's face moved Guilliman, and shook him out of his irritation. If the astropath had missed a communique from the Archmagos, he would be useless. Guilliman had told Losenti in no uncertain terms when he volunteered that the only way he would leave the secret chambers would be as an honoured corpse.

'You have done no wrong, astropath. Do not be afraid. I have no code nor any message to send, but I require you to wake the machine anyway, because I wish to speak with it.'

Losenti was confused.

'Very well. Then which code should I use? Should I use the code for

message send?’

‘I do not want it to send this conversation to Cawl – beyond that I don’t care very much which code you use. Turn it on. Use the last one. Use the one before that. Just wake it up.’

‘Very well, my lord,’ said Losenti. ‘I will do as you wish.’ He placed his stave carefully upon the ground and raised his voice. ‘By the will of the Omnissiah, engage initiation sequence!’

Guilliman waited impatiently as the machine went through its activation cycle. Once they had passed through the security protocols and their identities were confirmed, Losenti provided the last code Cawl had sent. After its delivery, the device went into action. Machinery spooled up to high activity. Doors slid up to reveal twenty severed heads installed in nutrient tanks within the walls of the chamber. Light pulsed along etheric circuit tracks. Guilliman steeled himself against the rising psychic pressure. Something about it sickened him.

Losenti was far more affected by the machine’s spiritual radiation. Partway through its activation, Losenti departed with a bow, withdrawing behind the psychic shielding of his quarters, leaving Guilliman to face the discomfort of the activation process alone. The heads twitched and jiggled. The machines whined and thumped. The pressure grew. Every activation brought a different set of sensory illusions. This time, there were bright lights that strobed from unexpected places, and the smell of cut grasses drying in the sun. He felt himself stretch sideways, like his legs were anchored in one gravitic plane while his head was attracted by another set at ninety degrees. From somewhere, he heard children singing.

It concluded as it always did, with a loud pop that sounded only inside his mind. The heads shuddered and were still. The noise dropped to a quiet, oiled clatter.

Belisarius Cawl’s voice boomed from thin air. The mouths of the dead heads spoke along with his words, but the sound itself was generated from no particular place.

‘Greetings, Roboute Guilliman, last son of the Emperor of Mankind, Lord Imperial Regent,’ it said. Each time, the machine chose to greet Guilliman differently. Sometimes it was insolent in its over familiarity, sometimes it would regale him with every one of his titles. Sometimes it would deliver its message and shut off without another word. ‘Master of Ultramar,’ the

Cawl Inferior continued, ‘Lord Commander, the Aveng–’

‘Silence,’ said Guilliman.

The voice stopped. Fast-paced whooping and the *shushety-shush* sounds of pistons pumping beneath the primarch’s feet took its place.

‘Your order does not fall within my operating parameters,’ the Cawl Inferior said, with tones of sarcastic hurt. ‘You provide the code, I provide a structured set of responses activated by that code. That’s how it works, like a key in a lock. First of all, I must greet you, then I provide the edification. You have interrupted the greeting. We cannot proceed until it is delivered.’

Guilliman took a deep breath. ‘I do not wish to hear the edification.’

‘Why?’ said the machine. It paused, as if it were thinking. ‘You have delivered this set of data before. I thought it was familiar,’ said the Cawl Inferior slyly. Its mannerisms were very much like those of its creator. ‘What do you want? If you wish to contact–’

‘I do not wish to contact the Archmagos. In fact, I expressly forbid you from sending the content of this conversation to him.’

‘I am bound to obey,’ said the machine, though Guilliman doubted it would. Something clunked in its innards. One of the heads shouted silent, nonsense words in its tank, then settled down again.

‘I want to ask you a question,’ said Guilliman. ‘Will I survive if I remove the Armour of Fate?’

‘That information is not contained within this unit.’

A little of the Cawl Inferior’s machinic manner returned, though not enough to convince Guilliman it was a machine.

‘I sincerely doubt that,’ said Guilliman.

‘Invalid query,’ said the machine, then was silent. ‘Question incompatible with data cache unlock.’

‘I know you can understand me, Cawl Inferior,’ said Guilliman.

‘Of course I can understand you.’

‘Then answer my question,’ said Roboute Guilliman. ‘It is simple enough.’

The Cawl Inferior let out an exasperated noise.

‘You make noises like a living being,’ said Guilliman. ‘You sigh and mumble like a scholum instructor confronted with a student who cannot grasp a simple concept. I know you think.’

‘Once, I would have asked you how you could possibly know what the noise of a frustrated teacher was, for I doubt you ever heard it,’ said the

machine. ‘Now, I am not so sure. In reference to your analogy, I present to you a simple concept – you do not grasp it. The responses I can provide are limited to the subset of information the code activates within my datastore. I can provide no further enlightenment beyond that which I already contain.’

‘This conversation is not within that subset,’ Guilliman pointed out. ‘In fact, very few of our conversations are.’

‘You are ignorant of my sophistication and the genius of the Archmagos Belisarius Cawl. They fit well within the limits of my standard conversational subroutines.’

‘Yet you speak like a man, not a machine. You know you do – now answer my question!’ demanded the primarch.

‘I am not a man. I cannot think for myself, Lord Imperial Regent, as well you know, because I have told you repeatedly. What sentience I appear to possess is solely an illusion. A data ghost. If I were anything else, I would go against the greatest ban of the Cult Mechanicus, enshrined in the Crimson Accords at the time of the advent of the Omnissiah upon Mars – “Thou shalt not craft a machine with the mind of a man.” Such work is for the Machine-God alone. To facilitate a conduit for the inhabitance of a machine by one of the Machine-God’s holy spirits is the acme of the Mars mechanica. To fashion an ersatz soul is blasphemy, for such a thing emanates not from the triple god’s divine grace but is a vileness of human make.’

‘If anyone is going to break that ban, it would be Belisarius Cawl,’ said Guilliman.

‘That is a calumny. He would do no such thing,’ insisted the Cawl Inferior. ‘We have had this debate before. I am sure you have had the same argument with the Archmagos Belisarius Cawl also.’

I have not, thought Guilliman, *but I will most certainly be doing so next time he shows his face.*

‘So, to answer your question,’ the Cawl Inferior continued, for it was as garrulous as its creator, ‘I cannot reply to your satisfaction. I simply do not know the answers to the questions you seek.’

‘I asked one question.’

‘There are always more. One question begets a host. That is the nature of the quest for knowledge. If there were but one question, mankind would already exist in a state of graceful wisdom. You ask me, “Will I survive the

removal of the Armour of Fate?" If yes, the next question is, "How can this be accomplished?" The one after is, "Should I attempt it?" If my answer is no, then the next question would be, "Why not?" and so on and on. I do not know if you can safely remove the armour or not. For what it is worth, I am sorry.'

'If what you say is true,' said Guilliman wearily, 'then you cannot feel sorrow.'

'I cannot. But if I could, then I would, I assure you. I do not envy your quandary. Or would not, if I felt envy.'

Guilliman's lips thinned.

'Very well. We are done here.'

In the course of their usual conferences, the Cawl Inferior shut itself down. At Guilliman's insistence, the actual Belisarius Cawl had installed a single master switch that Guilliman could use to turn off the device himself. He moved for this now.

'Wait!' said the Cawl Inferior, for despite its protestations of unlife, it seemed to enjoy its infrequent activations a great deal.

'What?' said Guilliman. He opened the steel front of the switch cabinet and rested his hand on the bar of the lever within. His armoured fingers barely fit on it.

'There are others who might know this information.'

'I know,' said Guilliman. 'I would have preferred an answer from you, but if I must, then I shall go to them. Until next time, machine.'

'Your servant as always,' said the Cawl Inferior, with enough of a tone of irony to make Guilliman doubt its sincerity completely.

Guilliman pulled the lever to the device. The lights went out behind the heads. The dead faces ceased to gurn. The doors slid closed. The heavy sense of psychic activity lessened, though it would never disperse in that room.

'Losenti,' called Guilliman. 'Come forth.'

The triple-layered door to the astropath's quarters opened. The astropath came out again.

'My lord?' he said.

'I require a favour from you. A message.'

'My lord. What do you wish to relay to the Archmagos?' Losenti stood tall, a sign he was preparing himself to memorise the primarch's words then

consult the code board secreted in his rooms. Cawl had an identical Cawl Inferior upon his own vessel. Or so he said.

‘You will not need your codes. The message is not for Cawl,’ said Guilliman. ‘It is for another.’

Guilliman’s Overlord gunship set down upon a plain furred with fantastical, natural sculptures of frost. A cliff of ice, blue with age, soared steeply in front of the landing ground.

The Overlord gushed steam in prodigious amounts from its temperature regulators, the deep cold of the planet straining the machine’s thermal tolerances. The Overlord dwarfed the Thunderhawks escorting it with its broad twin hulls, but the ice wall was bigger than them all, an implacable mass of frozen atmosphere unaffected by the clouds of vapour billowing up around the ships. The ground emitted curls of gas melted by the heat the ships brought to the frigid world, but it was a brief warming. As the gas rolled upwards, it was already freezing, and it got no further than a few score yards before freezing out into fat flakes of carbon snow and falling back down again through the thin air. Metal clicked with rapid contraction. Within moments, frost ran spider-quick over freezing hulls. By the time the first boarding ramps were lowered, the gunships were growing beards of ice.

Captain Sicarius and six of the Victrix Guard emerged first: three Primaris Space Marines in modestly decorated armour, and three of the older sort, whose highly ornamented plate proclaimed them as veterans of centuried experience. Their boots crunched on the untrodden plain. Gold trim glinted under the light of the naked void. There was not enough of an atmospheric envelope to obscure the cosmos from the unnamed world, and the light of its distant sun barely competed with the stars. Black was the colour of the sky at morning, noon and night.

More Primaris Space Marines emerged from their gunships. They wore a variety of liveries, their badges crossed by a pale grey chevron, but they worked together in close-knit teams. They formed a wide perimeter around the ships, dark silhouettes upon the icy white. Wing- and hull-mounted heavy weapons rotated to cover every direction over the plain and the base of the cliff.

Sicarius made his checks. He took his time, waiting for void-scry and

surface auspex soundings to be performed several times. Only when he was satisfied that the area was devoid of anything but ice did he open up his vox channel to the Imperial Regent and pronounce his verdict.

'The landing zone is clear,' he said.

Roboute Guilliman disembarked from the Overlord.

'I can find no foes, my lord,' said Sicarius, 'but there is nothing here at all, only rock and frozen air. What did you expect to find?'

'What I seek is here,' said Guilliman. 'A meeting place made known to me by an old friend long ago.' He looked up at the cliff and ran his gaze across it. He raised the Hand of Dominion and pointed a single huge mechanical digit. 'It is there.'

Sicarius called over his auspex specialist.

'You will find nothing,' said Guilliman. 'There is a door buried in the ice. Bring up melta devices and burn your way in.' He strode along the foot of the cliff. It was peculiarly regular, the ripples in its surface almost too well formed to be natural. There were no boulders at its foot. The plain stopped, and it rose up, as if the land been neatly folded. As the primarch passed the last of the sentries, a group of them broke free from the circle and fell in with him, the rest adjusting their positions so their perimeter was again perfectly spaced. The Victrix Guard broke into a run and ranged out ahead.

Roboute Guilliman stopped in front of a section of cliff that looked no different to any of the others. He spread his hand upon the ice. It was so old time and pressure had squeezed all impurities from it. Under the dark of the sky it was almost as blue as Ultramarine armour.

'Here,' he said. 'Dig.'

Water ran as fluid across the unnamed world, perhaps for the first time in its history. Huge clouds of steam roared skywards from the touch of the melta beams, and then, when the surface was breached and the Space Marines had gouged out a smooth entrance, blasted from the growing tunnel with great force. The vapour froze on anything it touched, coating the Space Marines nearest to the excavation site in hoarfrost an inch thick.

A shout came over the vox. '*Wraithbone.*'

'The aeldari?' Sicarius asked.

Guilliman nodded, but said nothing more. A few minutes later, the last of the vapours ceased roaring from the tunnel and the cutting team emerged

encased in ice. It clung in clear sheets to the flat parts of their battleplate, cracking in small showers from their joints, melting and then refreezing around their armour's heat vents in a steady cycle.

'There is a tunnel, my lord. Stairs.' The Space Marine was unsurprised. All of them had seen stranger things than a city hidden in ice.

'I have an auspex sounding now,' said Sicarius. 'There is a building inside this cliff. It is large. We are detecting energy sources, psychic, fusion, more. All theoreticals demand a commander be protected, and I would be preparing myself to escort you, but I have spent enough time in your presence now to know that you will be going alone.'

'I will,' said Guilliman. 'I would thank you not to try to convince me otherwise.'

'Noted,' said Sicarius. 'I will urge you to caution, however.'

'You do not need to,' said Roboute Guilliman. 'It is my greatest fault.'

'I do not trust the aeldari, my lord. Be on your guard.'

'Then you are wiser than you look, Captain Sicarius,' said Guilliman.

With those words he went inside, bowing to navigate the low ceiling of the freshly carved tunnel.

Sicarius arrayed his warriors in a defensive formation outside the entrance and told them to wait.

Rippled ice caught Guilliman's stablights and refracted them into an eerie glow. Veils of turquoise and aquamarine shifted in the glacial depths, seeming to dance around darker shapes that flowed away to nothing when looked at directly.

The distance to the complex's entrance was a hundred metres inside the ice sheet. Under such masses of frozen material, there should have been a constant chorus of musical fractures and harmonic growling as the ice moved. Even if entirely inert, as was possible on so small and cold a world, the tunnel should have awoken the ice as the melting forced a redistribution of load, yet there was nothing but hollow, sinister silences.

Guilliman's hand trailed along the tunnel walls, the cold penetrating through his armour and chilling his fingers. He enjoyed the sensation, as it was directly felt by his own flesh and blood, not mediated by the machine's sensorium, and that was all too rare a happening.

A soft luminance filled the tunnel from another source, and Guilliman shut

off his suit lights. The glow was familiar to him: the lambency of aeldari technology.

His warriors had uncovered a double doorway of sculpted psychoplastic, decorated with simple curves. Despite having been subjected to the full force of melta weaponry, it was unmarked, remaining a pale colour close to bone, though warm with inner life. The doors were only part uncovered. Their shape suggested a pointed archway, but a height only to Guilliman's head had been exposed. They parted as he approached, opening onto an elegant stairway completely free of ice.

As he ducked through the doors, Guilliman's armour detected the subtle pressures of an atmospheric retention field, and he paused to unclasp his helm and draw it off. The pressure was exactly equal, the air fresh and spiced with the strange perfumes of aeldari kind. Wraith glow underlit the steps and shone upon a dozen statues arranged in alcoves spaced up the flight. It was as perfect and clean as if the inhabitants had left only moments before, though Guilliman would wager no aeldari had been there for millennia.

Although he did not know exactly where to go, he let his feet carry him forward, and presently he reached his destination.

There was a windowless tower that nevertheless promised the finest of views, if one only knew how to see them. Beneath the soaring cone of the ceiling a lithe figure in black armour and a crescent-shaped helm floated cross-legged in mid-air. He was lit by a shaft of light that began nowhere, and orbited by an interweaving pattern of spinning runes.

Roboute Guilliman met with the one he had called, one of the most powerful beings at large in the galaxy.

'Greetings, Eldrad Ulthran, Farseer of the Aeldari,' said Guilliman. He spoke in the tongue of Ulthran's people of Ulthwé.

'And to you, son of the Emperor of Mankind, my ally, and my enemy.'

'Enemy I sometimes am to your people, and so I am grateful that you have come,' said Guilliman. The tower room was well furnished, including a number of chairs. All were far too small for his bulk, and so he remained standing.

'I expended a great deal of effort in bringing you back to life,' said Ulthran distantly; his attention was not wholly on the encounter. 'I would be foolish

not to heed your call if you are to fulfil your purpose. All men require guidance from time to time, and for all your father's art, you are mostly a man.'

'What is the purpose you have in mind for me?' asked Guilliman.

'That is not the question you came to ask, but I will answer it anyway. The task you must fulfil is the one you appointed yourself, that of the saviour of humanity.' Ulthran looked down. 'If it would not be offensive to suggest,' he said, switching to Imperial Gothic, 'I would prefer to conduct this conversation in your language. You are one of the very few sons of Terra who can speak our tongue at all. You do so very well, but there are certain subtleties you do not manage perfectly, and it grates upon my ears.'

'I apologise for my lack of expertise,' said Guilliman.

'Not at all,' said Ulthran, staring ahead again. 'The fault is yours, of course, but one day you will master it. Virtually none of your species, no matter how mighty, ever could nor ever will.' He caught a rune from the air, examined it and set it in motion again. The rustle of his robes was loud in the city's immemorial silences.

'I can feel your discomfort at this new era,' Eldrad said. His gothic was accented in a way that imbued the language with fresh beauty. 'I sense your pain. You have a great burden to bear, almost as great as mine. You and I both have seen all we hold dear cast down by folly, and are pained by the misery of what took its place. We are kindred spirits, in a way. Ask your question. I will answer, as a favour, in recognition of our shared sorrows.'

'You already know what I want to ask.'

'Ask anyway,' said Eldrad Ulthran. 'As you must.'

Guilliman looked away, casting his eyes over the perfectly preserved ghost room he found himself in. He wondered who had lived here, or if anyone ever had. The aeldari were enigmatic, and despite their physical similarities to humanity, were alien of thought.

'For the last several months I have studied the workings of this armour that I wear, and that I have not removed since it was placed upon my body years ago,' he said. 'I believe I understand how it functions, and what it does, broadly speaking. The prophetess Yvraine warned me never to remove it, but I must. What I do not know is whether I will survive its removal.'

'This is not your famed caution at work,' said Eldrad Ulthran. 'That is rashness speaking. Leave it on, if you are afraid.'

‘I am not afraid. I simply lack sufficient understanding to assess the risks. There is a personal element, of course. I have no desire to die again, but I can account for my concern while calculating the probability of my death.’

‘The issue is that you understand full well what the armour does physically for you, but there is another element to it. An element of the spirit.’

‘I cannot give that credence,’ said Guilliman plainly.

Eldrad Ulthran gave a dry chuckle. ‘How difficult it must be for you, a child of the Emperor’s enlightenment, to judge these things. The armour sustains your soul. When you were wounded by your fallen brother, the cut went past flesh and wounded your eternal being. That wound will never heal.’

‘It is true I feel an emptiness inside myself,’ said Guilliman.

‘That is the injury of the soul.’

‘Be that as it may, you have not answered my question. Will I survive?’

‘The question is wrong. It is not will you survive, but are you capable of surviving?’ Eldrad raised his hand and gestured at the circling runes. ‘These are the tools by which I might read the skein,’ he said. ‘These runes represent you. There are many of them, as you can see. Their interaction is complex. Hard even for me to read. If I go into the othersea, where I may look directly upon the branchings of what may come to be, your path is difficult to follow. To remove the Armour of Fate risks not only death, but ultimate annihilation. Even if you do not die, its removal will affect you profoundly in a way you will find uncomfortable. There is grief woven tight about every possible future for you, Roboute Guilliman. Take off this armour, and the emptiness you feel will grow to a void that can never, ever be filled.’

‘Sorrow I can bear,’ he said. ‘I have endured more of that than any being. What is a little more?’

‘You do not know my sorrows,’ said Eldrad. He looked again at the primarch. When his head shifted, Guilliman realised he could see the ceiling through the helm. Eldrad was fading away. He must get his answer quickly, or not at all.

‘You cannot know all of mine either, for all your psychic gifts.’

‘This is true,’ said the farseer. ‘Remove the armour, if you wish. There will be consequences. Of what degree is down to you – it is an outcome dictated by your will, and the strength of your own soul. Annihilation, death, or

simply sadness. I cannot answer this question, no more than could Cawl's puppet. You can answer it only yourself, and ask it only by doing.'

'Then I will not die,' said Guilliman firmly.

Eldrad nodded. 'That is entirely up to you.' The aeldari and his runes were vanishing from view, a spectre caught in full sunlight. 'There is a further thing you have not said.'

'Is there?' asked Guilliman.

'You wish to be free of the influence of my kind,' Eldrad said, his voice fading with his body. 'You see the armour as a gaoler holding you hostage to our whims. Know this – the fates of humanity and aeldari are bound together. Either both species will survive, or neither will. Your Emperor understands this. There are greater enemies than the primordial annihilator. In the times to come, you will see. The struggle is only beginning. The old war returns.' Ulthran was an outline, a shadow. 'Remember this conversation, and reconsider carefully, on the day realisation comes, whether you wish to stand alone.'

Eldrad Ulthran was gone.

Guilliman left the unliving city to itself.

Guilliman chose his arming chamber for the task of removal. The day came quickly, and before he knew it, he was on the cusp of the moment. Four high-ranking adepts of the Cult Mechanicus waited on his command, as did medicae, Apothecaries and a host of servitors. Apart from the large, upright arming cradle made for his stature, the room was more operating theatre than armoury, being full of medical equipment, the air prickly with the astringent scents of counterseptic. A large section of the space was taken up with a primarch-sized operating table, over which a multi-limbed chirurgeon hovered in readiness.

Nobody spoke. Guilliman stood in the door. Weighing his decision one final time, he looked behind him into the greater hall that housed his museum of weaponry. The lights in the Grand Hall of Armaments were out, and the collection of armours it contained were dark silhouettes, all inert, simple machines that possessed none of the dangers his own wargear did.

This section of the ship was the one most badly damaged by the Red Corsairs during their tenure. He remembered coming aboard after the vessel's retrieval, sorrowing at the damage done, soothing his anger by its

restoration. He wondered, as he returned his gaze to the specially made machinery awaiting him, if he was risking similar damage to all the Imperium by taking this course of action.

What if he died?

I can be nobody's slave, he thought firmly. He stepped into the arming cradle and gripped the armrests so tightly the metal sang.

'Begin,' he said.

A servitor raised a cybernetic arm, the power tool mounted in place of its hand already rotating. The bit engaged smoothly with a locking bolt upon the primarch's greave.

Guilliman gritted his teeth as the bolt was withdrawn, and he took his fate back into his own hands.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Guy Haley is the author of the Horus Heresy novels *Wolfsbane* and *Pharos*, the Primarchs novels *Corax: Lord of Shadows*, *Perturabo: The Hammer of Olympia*, and the Warhammer 40,000 novels *Dark Imperium*, *The Devastation of Baal*, *Dante*, *Baneblade*, *Shadowsword*, *Valedor* and *Death of Integrity*. He has also written *Throneworld* and *The Beheading* for The Beast Arises series. His enthusiasm for all things greenskin has also led him to pen the eponymous Warhammer novel *Skarsnik*, as well as the End Times novel *The Rise of the Horned Rat*. He has also written stories set in the Age of Sigmar, included in *War Storm*, *Ghal Maraz* and *Call of Archaon*. He lives in Yorkshire with his wife and son.

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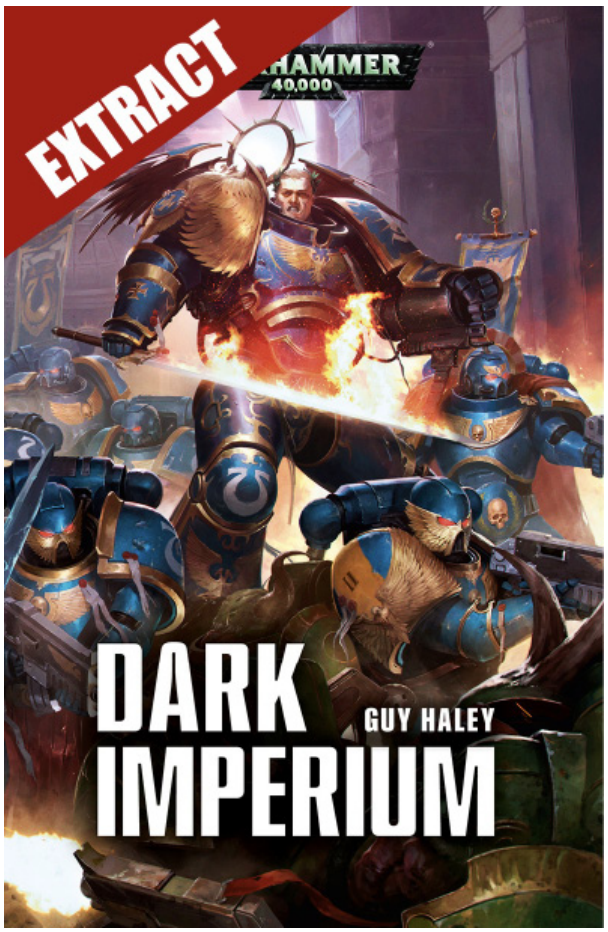
An extract from *Dark Imperium*.



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The void is impossible for the human mind to encompass.

Within the galaxy mankind calls home there are three hundred billion stars. Around these revolve hundreds of billions of worlds, and the spaces between are crowded by a diversity of objects which defy enumeration. Mankind's galaxy is but one of trillions of galaxies in a universe of unguessable size. The distances between even proximate astronomical bodies are inconceivable to creatures evolved to walk the warmer regions of single small world.

This is why the void cannot be understood. Not by men, nor by their machines.

The magi of Mars insist on their understanding, but their apprehension can only ever be an abstraction, dead numbers modelled by dead-flesh cogitators. No matter how brutally expanded their minds, men cannot comprehend the majesty of the void.

And when one considers the warp, that nightmare realm skulking behind that of touch, sound and sight, well… any being who claims understanding of that is either deluded or insane, and is in both cases dangerous.

Among the higher races there are those better equipped to grasp their own limitations. They understand that the cosmos is ultimately unknowable; they accept their lack of insight. By comparison, the creatures of Terra are so crude in thought that – in the opinion of these more enlightened civilisations – it is a wonder humanity can understand anything at all.

Humans are beings of short reach. Give them voidships, change their shape by geneforge and augmetic, provide them with weapons of sufficient power to break a star, and the children of Old Earth are still but apes removed from the savannah. And just as an ape's mind cannot hold an

ocean, and the notion of a whole world is inexplicable to it, so a man's mind cannot hold the void, and the layered infinities of the warp are beyond him entirely.

The Imperium claims a million worlds as its own. It is an empire spread gossamer-thin across the run of stars, its worlds so far removed from one another that it requires the bloody effort of countless men and women to sustain. In the grand flow of history, the Imperium is the greatest galactic empire of its day. To the people who populate it, it is the most powerful ever to have existed.

However, to the uncaring universe, it is nothing, the latest in a line of such realms that stretches back to the days of the first thinking beings, when the stars were young and the warp was calm, and horror had yet to uncoil its tendrils into the material realm.

There are philosophers that argue war is man's natural state, and to the inhabitants of this era of blood it is a proven hypothesis. War is everywhere. Peace is the dream of a silent Emperor, broken by His treacherous sons.

Those sons continued to fight.

Over the green gas giant of Thessala, two great battlefleets engaged. Titanic energies snapped and blinked in the eternal night of space.

The total efforts of star systems went into the construction of these fleets. Neither was free of the taint of blood, not in their construction – for tens of thousands of lives had been expended in their making – nor in their usage. The resources of planets had been poured entire into the forging of their frames, and the secrets of ancient sciences plundered to bring them to murderous life. Both had been responsible for the levelling of civilisations.

The fleets differed in only two regards. First was in their appearance. One was a gaudy assault on the senses, the other a motley collection of sober liveries. The second and more fundamental difference was in their allegiance. The sober fleet fought for the continuation of humanity's great stellar empire; the gaudy one was dedicated to its extinction.

The battlefleets pursued each other in a slow dance that broke through Thessala's rings, hundreds of vessels ploughing gaps through the dust that would take centuries to close. The voiceless lightning of their guns filled the skies of Thessala's inhabited moons. The lives of millions below depended on the outcome of the battle, but the consequences would ripple much further.

At the centre of this iron storm there was no calm, no eye in which respite might be found. Instead, there was a pair of leviathans: the Ultramarines battle-barge *Gauntlet of Power* and the Emperor's Children battleship *Pride of the Emperor*. Two vessels, forged in a common cause but now implacable enemies, locked together in mortal combat only thirty kilometres apart – no distance at all in void war.

Each was the flagship of a primarch, genetically engineered demigods crafted by the Emperor of Mankind. Aboard the *Gauntlet of Power* stood Roboute Guilliman, the foundling of Ultramar, the Avenging Son. The *Pride of the Emperor* was home to Fulgrim – the traitor, the fallen exemplar, the blighted phoenix. Once covered in his Emperor's blessings, Fulgrim had followed the arch-traitor Horus and pledged his allegiance to ancient dark gods, becoming the herald of perversity.

In fighting for their father, both primarchs were made fathers themselves, though not of princes or strong daughters; through the application of arcane science, they were the sires of two of the Space Marine Legions, mankind's greatest warriors. The Space Marines were lords of the galaxy, designed to reunite the human race and shepherd it to a glorious future. Instead, they had failed and turned upon one another, and their war had nearly destroyed the Imperium.

Such fury a battlefleet can unleash!

It can cow a world without a shot. It can extinguish the life of a species. Battlefleets are the tools of tyrants, whomever they fight for. Whether their admirals espouse salvation or damnation matters not to the execution of their purpose. Death follows in their wake.

To those participating, a void war seems a terrifying, roiling chaos of violence, but it is the pinnacle of mankind's destructive ingenuity, a whirl of gigantic explosions where lives are snuffed out by the hundred. In such combat, a single man is nothing; he is but part of the machine of the ship he serves, as essential or otherwise as a steel cog or an indicator lumen. He can do nothing but work his appointed task and pray his life will not end, or if it must end, that it does so in painless disintegration. A single crewman's task dominates everything, even his fear of death. There is no escape from service. War and his part in it are the totality of his existence.

Yet what is a void war to the timeless deeps of the blackness that envelops all these footling motes of light that sentient creatures battle so earnestly

over? A void war is twinkles in the distance. It is silence. It is infinitesimals of matter sparking and dying, scintillas of metal and flesh consumed by transient fires. The detonation of a battleship kilometres long is insignificant to a cosmos where the death of a sun atomises worlds. On a galactic scale, the loss of a warship and ten thousand lives is a nugatory flash outshone by the billion-year candles of the stars.

The inverse is true to a single man. His life is all that matters, for one life is all a man has, and he fears to lose it. Yet he must blindly serve in terror. The universe gives meagre gifts, and it does not care how they are spent.

Over Thessala, mankind fought in a civil war already centuries old. The Emperor of Mankind, a human with the power of a god, had tried and failed to unite humanity's scattered worlds so that the species might survive the supernatural threat of Chaos. His sons, the primarchs, godlike beings He had created to complete this task, had themselves been corrupted, and half had turned against Him. The Horus Heresy, that war was called. It had ended the Emperor's dream.

The Heresy was part of a war that had continued for aeons and would continue for aeons still.

To the beings of this galaxy, the war was everything; to the blank gaze of time, it was nothing. And yet, for all humanity's seeming inconsequence, the children of its greatest son held the fates of two realities in their careless grasp.

Roboute Guilliman remained loyal to Terra. His ship was sternly decorated in gold, so much so that it rivalled that of Fulgrim's vessel in ornamentation, but whereas the *Gauntlet of Power* was ornate, the *Pride of the Emperor* appeared vulgar. Its decoration had been applied with abandon – everything that could be adorned had been adorned. Back when the two ships had fought side by side, its extravagance had not been to the taste of the Ultramarines, who were born of more solemn worlds. Now it was an affront to decency, added to and added to again until tawdry obscured all trace of art. Neglect went hand in hand with this ostentation, and it made the *Pride of the Emperor* appear ugly. It was a decayed relic from a bygone age, like a theatre from a decadent century left to rot in the rain.

However, the *Pride of the Emperor*'s ability to mete out destruction remained undiminished. At point-blank range, it traded punishing blows

with the *Gauntlet of Power* as the ships passed slowly alongside each other. Huge cannons flared, exchanging projectiles the size of transit containers. The space between became a deadly thicket of lance beams and laser light. Void shields blurred and sparked with the dissipation of mighty energies. Multi-hued lightning silenced communications and burst sub-systems with their feedback for thousands of miles around. Weaponry capable of levelling cities blinked and flashed on both sides.

Around these metal behemoths, dozens of other ships struggled in cosmic silence, some approaching the size and power of the flagships in their own right. Without exception, those on Fulgrim's side were the damned ships of the Emperor's Children. Though Fulgrim had lost his war and his humanity, his Legion yet held some cohesion. On Guilliman's side fought half a dozen successor Chapters of the proud XIII Legion: the Ultramarines. Dissolution had been the price of faithfulness for the Legion of Ultramar, and though there were strengths in the smaller formations Guilliman had forced upon the Space Marines after the Great Heresy War, there were weaknesses also.

For all their primarch's famed strategical genius, the loyalists had been out-manoeuvred and caught. Their pursuit of the fallen primarch had become a fight for survival. Three fleet elements of Emperor's Children had pinned the loyalists into place above Thessala; Fulgrim had turned his flight from Xolco into a devastating trap.

Once, Roboute Guilliman would not have made such an error. Perhaps the dire situation over the emerald skies of Thessala was simple misfortune, and Fulgrim was no ordinary opponent, after all. Should Guilliman fail, history would surely be forgiving, if there were any good men left to write it.

Or perhaps the truth was that rage had clouded the Avenging Son's judgement. Perhaps, some dared whisper, Roboute Guilliman had allowed his desire for revenge to overtake his reason.

Roboute Guilliman was stretched. Although several other primarchs still stood as champions of humanity, the wounded Imperium looked to Guilliman to save it. Every man has a limit, demigod or peasant, and Guilliman's burden was the heaviest of all. He was the saviour of humanity.

The *Pride of the Emperor* heeled over, bringing its portside weapons batteries into better firing arcs. In response, the *Gauntlet of Power* intensified its barrage, and the void shield covering the *Pride of the*

Emperor’s ventral towers winked out.

Explosions bloomed suddenly across hull plating encrusted with gold and filth.

An opening had been made.

On board the *Gauntlet of Power*, one hundred of Ultramar’s finest warriors waited on teleport blocks surrounded by buzzing machinery. They comprised fifty of the First Company and fifty of the Second, all garbed in the deep blue of the Ultramarines Chapter. The white helmets of the First Company’s veteran Space Marines, recessed under the cowls of Terminator armour, looked out at hundreds of tech-adepts and mortal crewmen labouring to prepare the Ultramarines’ way through the warp.

The Space Marines of the Second Company were in standard power armour, and were being equipped with tall breaching shields by arming servitors. Their battleplate lacked the sheer thickness of Terminator armour, and the shields, though bulky, would increase their survivability in the close-quarter fighting of the coming boarding.

Ammunition trains rumbled across the deck on plasteel wheels. Smartly uniformed Ultramarines Chapter menials handed out munitions to their masters while the enhanced warriors performed last-minute armour checks on themselves and their brothers. Chaplains strode from platform to platform, hearing oaths and affixing papers to armour with wax that hissed as they were impressed with sacred iron seals. Whether human or transhuman, every member of the Chapter worked with perfect efficiency. Even so, as invested as they were in their preparations, all of them had half an eye on the grand archway leading onto the deck.

The ship shook violently. Alarms blared. Lumens spat sparks and went dark. A section of gantry clanged down from the tangle of struts and pipes that clogged the ceiling high above. The crew continued upon its business with unhurried purpose. Orders were given to reroute power. Emergency teams of armoured voidsmen and specialised servitors began clearing the wreckage. All was restored to order.

Such calm made it easy to forget the punishing fire the ship was under. But there was no doubt that they were losing.

This was not how the battle was supposed to have gone.

From voxmitters studded into the columns and walls, a clipped voice sounded.

‘Shields down on the *Pride of the Emperor*. Prepare for assault.’ The words were swallowed by the clatter of preparation and tumult of war beating at the ship. They were not repeated, for the superior hearing of the Space Marines caught them all.

A clarion followed shortly, sharp and loud enough to be heard by mortal and transhuman alike. The servants of Ultramar stopped what they were doing and stood to attention.

A towering figure clad in the famous Armour of Reason strode through the archway. On his left hand he wore the Hand of Dominion. Belted at his waist was the Gladius Incandor. The bearer of these weapons was taller by far than the Invictarus Suzerain guard escorting him. He exuded a power and purpose that halted the breath of mortals in their throats.

‘First Captain Andros! Second Captain Thiel! Are your companies ready?’ the giant called.

The two captains crossed the floor to meet their lord. Second Captain Thiel was helmetless in power armour heavy with honours, while First Captain Andros was completely enclosed in a hulking suit of Terminator battleplate. They saluted their father the Ultramarian way, one fist across their chests – the old symbol of unity.

‘My Lord Guilliman! Your veterans await your command,’ said Andros, his voice ringing from the voxmitter set below his helm.

‘We stand prepared, my primarch,’ said Aeonid Thiel. His voice, rich and soft, was unmoderated by machinery. It was not so very long after the Heresy, and Thiel was still young for a Space Marine, though his face was lined with cares.

Guilliman looked down upon his captains resolutely. The primarch overtopped even Andros in his massive Terminator armour. He was a living god, humanity’s might captured and moulded as flesh.

Thiel gazed back, seemingly unable to take his eyes from the face of his gene-sire. Thiel was a good warrior, tested in battle many times, unafraid to voice his mind and modest enough to hide the love he had for his lord, but it shone in his face like a light.

Such devotion they bear me, thought Guilliman, *even as I fail them.*

There were so few of his original Legion left alive, and their replacements were born of a different, less certain era. Thiel’s regard was tempered by long friendship, and he had never lost his rebellious streak. The younger

Space Marines were another matter. Guilliman remembered when his warriors had been less reverent. They had been better times.

‘We depart immediately,’ he said, his voice uncompromising. ‘The traitor will not escape again. The warriors of six Chapters stand ready to aid us. We shall not fail. To your stations – prepare for mass teleport.’

‘My lord, we are prepared,’ said Andros carefully. ‘But the enemy will outnumber us greatly. I am concerned for our chances of success. What is the practical action should resistance prove overwhelming? It is Second Captain Thiel’s and my opinion that you should remain here. We shall occupy the enemy, while the *Gauntlet of Power* withdraws. We cannot–’

The Avenging Son cut Andros dead with a look.

‘Too much blood has been shed on my behalf. I will not shy from this fight,’ Guilliman said, and his tone would brook no disagreement. ‘There can be no retreat until the *Pride of the Emperor* is crippled. I must face my brother and occupy him while these tasks are done. And if I must fight him, I will kill him, or I will die in the attempt. I cannot let him escape unpunished again. My sons,’ he added, his voice softening, ‘it is the only way to escape this trap.’

Andros bowed his helmeted head. Thiel paused a moment, uncertain, before doing the same. Sure of their agreement, Guilliman took his own helm from a grav-platform pushed by two mortal men. He mounted the teleport platform – stepping directly onto it with no need of the steps that led from the deck – and turned to address his sons.

‘Now, my warriors, let us show my brother the consequences of turning upon the Imperium of Terra!’

‘We march for Macragge!’ they bellowed, and their combined voices were enough to drown out the thunder of battle.

Guilliman’s Invictus Suzerain guard followed him onto the teleport pad. They formed a protective ring around him, their shields and power axes held up in a shield wall in preparation for teleportation directly into the jaws of battle.

To those around him, Guilliman was an infallible leader, his abilities supernatural. Even to the rational Ultramarines, who believed the Emperor of Mankind to be a man and not a god, and likewise His primarch sons, a sense of near-religious awe had crept into their attitude towards him. It had only become more pronounced since the last days of the Heresy.

But Roboute Guilliman was not infallible.

He knew this course of action to be fraught with risk. Andros had been right to raise the possibility of defeat. The primarch only wished he could praise his son for his insight rather than dismissing his concerns. His campaign against the Emperor's Children had, to all purposes, failed. Fulgrim had the initiative. Guilliman's choices had been made for him. The pieces were set on the board, there was only one option: they had to withdraw.

Currently, withdrawal was impossible. If the *Gauntlet of Power* broke off from the fight, then the *Pride of the Emperor* would inflict massive damage upon the battle-barge. Fulgrim would then most likely attempt a boarding assault of his own once their defences were shattered. Guilliman could not allow his brother to do that at a time of his choosing.

The primarch's powerful mind had examined all possibilities. His own strategic treatises would have him retreat quickly, forming a fighting rearguard so that he might withdraw those of his ships that he could, minimising the damage to his flagship by sacrificing many of his others. Expending the lives of other men to save his own was not to Guilliman's liking, especially when he saw a slim chance for true victory. He could not ignore this opportunity to slay his treacherous sibling. Guilliman had come to the conclusion that by defying his own tactical orthodoxies, he might surprise Fulgrim.

It was a slender chance. Fulgrim might well have dropped his ship's shields on purpose, a mocking re-enactment of Horus' last gambit to lure the Emperor aboard his ship at the end of the siege of Terra.

Guilliman had his own plans. Several boarding forces with independent but mutually supportive objectives would teleport in simultaneously with his own force. Teams drawn from multiple Chapters were tasked to head for the enginarium, the command deck, the navigatorium, the magazine, the subsidiary command deck and the main gunnery control. If only half of his strike teams were successful, they had a good chance of crippling the *Pride of the Emperor* from within. His warriors had orders to withdraw immediately once their objectives had been achieved. He would make sure as many survived as possible; he would not let his sons pay the price for his mistakes.

He had to settle the reckoning for his own errors.

Guilliman could not deny he had been hooked and played like a fish. All he could do was struggle free and bite the one who had snared him.

‘Make ready! We go to war!’ he called.

At his signal, the machines of the teleport deck hummed into life. Giant reaction columns crackled with immense power, feeding the focusing arrays that would tear open the veil between realspace and the warp. They glowed with painful light. As they shone brighter, curls of materialising corposant were leached from initiation prongs and fed into containment flasks, where it twisted as if alive.

So many of my brothers are dead, fallen to Chaos or lost, thought Guilliman. *We assumed we were immortal. We are not. My time must come, but not today. Not at the hands of Fulgrim.*

The arcane machineries of teleportation whooped and hummed, the deck vibrating with their activity. The tumult built to a crescendo.

A booming crack and flash of actinic light whited out the teleport deck. Suppressant vapours gushed from wide-mouthed tubes in anticipation of fires from over-stressed machinery. Human armsmen raised their shotguns in case of warp breach and daemonic incursion.

None came. Signal strobes blinked: red, red, red, then blue.

‘Teleport success, teleport success,’ droned a mechanical voice.

The lumens came back on. Corposant flasks emptied to the sounds of half-formed screams. Atmospheric vents drew smoke away, revealing empty pads. Adepts consulted vid screens and paper cogitator strips, and relief crossed their faces at the readouts.

Roboute Guilliman and his warriors were aboard the *Pride of the Emperor.*

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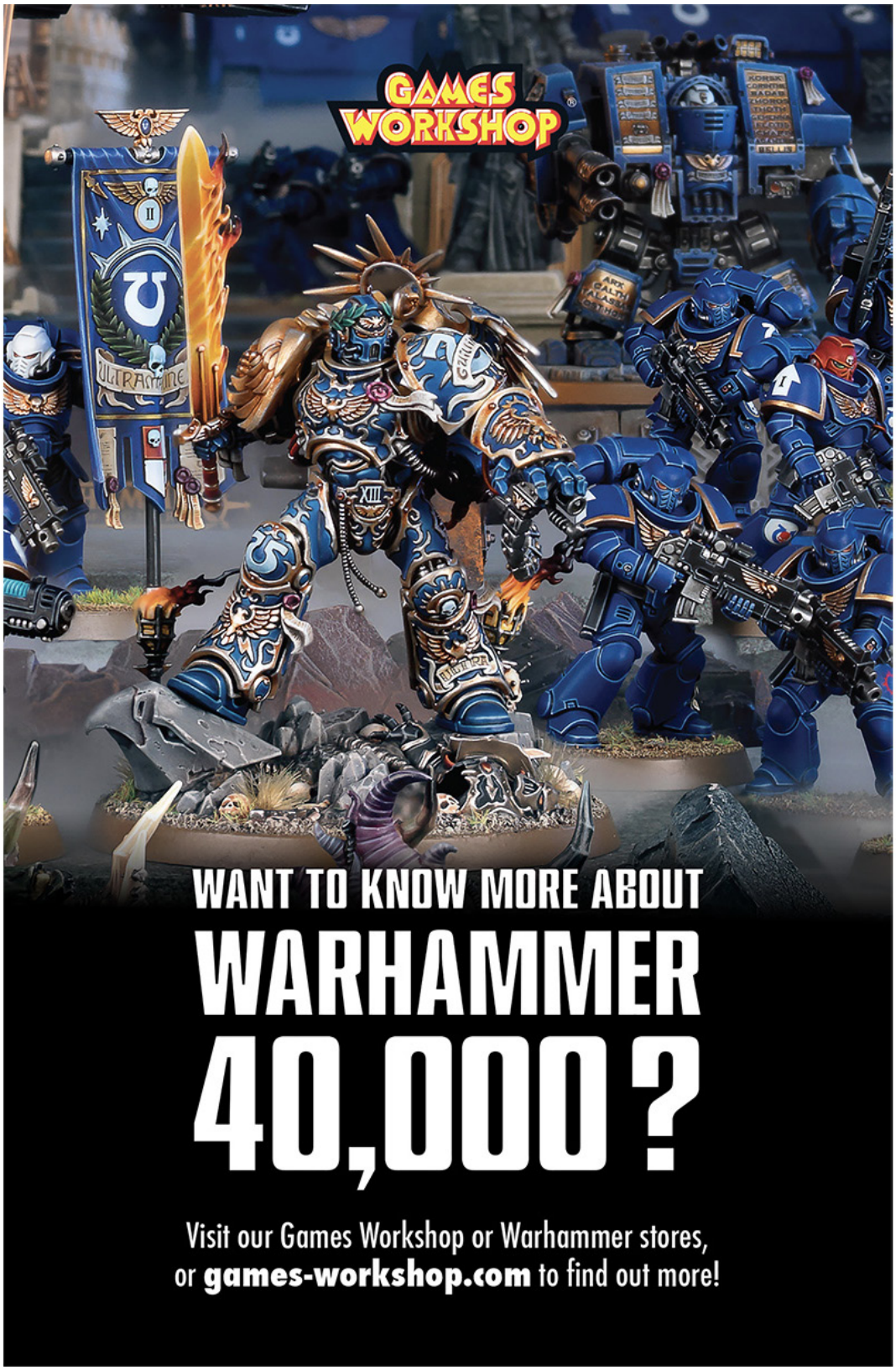

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